

SOUTH DOWNS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

AUTHORITY MEETING

Held at 1pm on 27 March 2025 in the Memorial Hall, South Downs Centre, North Street, Midhurst, West Sussex, GU29 9DH.

Present:

Vanessa Rowlands (Chair), Alun Alesbury, Heather Baker, Paul Bevan, Tim Burr, John Cross, Debbie Curnow-Ford, Peter Diplock, Janet Duncton, Mark Fairweather, Theresa Fowler, Joan Grech, Melanie Hunt, Stephen McAuliffe, Robert Mocatta, Jerry Pett, Steven Ridgeon, Andrew Shaxson, Vicki Wells and Stephen Whale.

South Downs National Park Authority Officers:

Siôn McGeever (Chief Executive Officer), Laura Sercombe (Director of Landscape and Strategy), Tim Slaney (Director of Planning), Annie Barnes (Deputy Monitoring Officer), Richard Fryer (Senior Governance Officer), Craig Garoghan (Chief Finance Officer (Interim)), Claire Onslow (Commercial and Strategic Manager) Richard Sandiford (Head of Governance and Monitoring Officer), Claire Tester (Planning Policy Manager), Victoria Turner (Head of Finance and Corporate Services) and James Winkworth (Head of the South Downs National Park Trust and Head of Marketing and Income Generation).

Also attended by:

Dan Montagnani (Vice Chair of the South Downs National Park Trust), Sarah Thompson (SDNPA Boardroom Apprentice)

CHAIR'S OPENING REMARKS

220. The Chair welcomed all present and provided general housekeeping information. She welcomed Dan Montagnani, the Vice Chair of the South Downs National Park Trust, and Sarah Thompson, the SDNPA Boardroom Apprentice.
221. The Chair shared that SDNPA Member Gary Marsh had been diagnosed with prostate cancer, noted that March was prostate cancer awareness month and encouraged everyone to get checked.

ITEM 1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

222. Apologies were received from Antonia Cox, Chris Dowling, John Hyland, Gary Marsh, Mark Potter and Daniel Stewart-Roberts.

ITEM 2. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

223. The following declarations were made:
- Tim Burr declared a public service interest in Agenda Item 9 and a pecuniary interest in Agenda Item 10 as a trustee of the South Downs National Park Trust and would withdraw from the meeting for Agenda Item 10.
 - Janet Duncton declared a public service interest in Agenda Item 9 and a pecuniary interest in Agenda Item 10 as a trustee of the South Downs National Park Trust and would withdraw from the meeting for Agenda Item 10. She also declared a public service interest in Agenda Item 14 as a West Sussex County Councillor.
 - Stephen McAuliffe declared a public service interest in Agenda Item 9 and a pecuniary interest in Agenda Item 10 as a trustee of the South Downs National Park Trust and would withdraw from the meeting for Agenda Item 10.
 - Robert Mocatta declared a public service interest in Agenda Item 11 as an East Hampshire District Councillor and in Agenda Item 14 as a Hampshire County Councillor.

- Mark Fairweather declared a public service interest in Agenda Item 13 as a Wealden District Councillor.
- Vanessa Rowlands declared a public service interest in Agenda Item 13 as a Cuckmere Valley Parish Councillor.
- Debbie Curnow-Ford declared a public service interest in Agenda Item 14 as a Hampshire County Councillor.

ITEM 3. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS HELD ON 10 DECEMBER 2024

224. The minutes of the Authority meeting held on 10 December 2024 were approved as a correct record subject to the following amendment:

- Minute 200, third point '*to make*' to be inserted before '*any minor and presentational changes*'.

ITEM 4. URGENT MATTERS

225. There were none.

ITEM 5. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

226. There was none.

ITEM 6. NEED FOR PART II EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

227. The Chair asked the Authority if any Member wished to discuss any matter on the Part II minutes of the Policy and Resources Committee meeting on 21 November 2024 at Agenda Item 19 and Part II minutes of the Appointment, Management and Standards Committee meetings on 24 July and 9 August 2024. As no Member wished to raise any point of accuracy or discuss any matters the meeting would not move into private session to consider these items.

ITEM 7. AUTHORITY CHAIR UPDATE

228. The Authority Chair introduced the report (NPA24/25-29) and thanked Members for their contributions. She provided the following update:

- She had recently attended a conference of the Protected Landscape Partnership on 'Championing EDI' which would feed into future work of the Authority.

229. Members made the following comments:

- The Planning Committee, when considering applications, were always looking for the opportunities to enhance access for developments into local cycling and walking networks. This would be fed back to the Local Access Forum.

230. **RESOLVED:** The Authority noted the update from the Chair of the South Downs National Park Authority.

ITEM 8. CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S PROGRESS REPORT

231. The Chief Executive introduced the report (NPA24/25-30) and provided the following updates:

- Noted the focus on finance and the contribution from Members at the budget workshops.
- Highlighted the work done by officers on the Local Plan and Partnership Management Plan
- Noted the recent changes from the planning reforms, devolution and spending review.

232. Members made the following comments:

- Impressed by the quality of work produced by Officers in the planning department on both the Local Plan and development management.
- How many responses had been received on the Local Plan review?
- Why was Wealden District Council (WDC) not included in the list of partners for the super National Nature Reserve (NNR)? There could be a real benefit to involving WDC at the earliest opportunity.
- Were the planning performance figures in 3.1 of the report those that the Authority had processed, or combined with host authorities?
- Were the planning performance figures for the Authority without the host authorities included?
- Did the CEO have any views on the reported comments from Kevin Bishop (CEO of Dartmoor National Park) on alternate funding streams including low-emission zones and hiking licences?
- Future settlements were likely to be difficult given the spending review scheduled by Government in June and the fact that Defra was not amongst the protected departments. The Secretary of State had commented at the Environment Committee that “we’re going to have to do more with less”.
- Were there any learnings from the low attendance at the Partnership Management Plan (PMP) event held in Lewes?
- The Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) budget was lower this year. Would that change the way projects were prioritised?

233. Members were advised:

- The Authority had received 3,000 responses to the Local Plan review, many making multiple points, which were now being processed and collated.
- The core partners for the super NNR were those who were land holders within the designated area whose land met the appropriate criteria for the nature reserve. The ambition was to add members once the super NNR was declared.
- The planning performance figures in the report were for the combined output of the Authority and the host authorities. The figures for just the Authority could be circulated to Members after the meeting.
- Officers could not comment on the situation at Dartmoor National Park but all National Parks were facing challenges in regard to funding.
- The Authority had recruited a new Director of Business Development and Growth to help make it more resilient and less dependent on spending reviews. The Medium Term Financial Strategy had been developed with a view to a worst-case scenario settlement.
- Registration for the PMP event in Lewes had been good and no obvious reasons for the lower attendance had been identified. It was noted that the quality of discussion on the day had been very high, perhaps in part due to the numbers in attendance.
- The FiPL budget was lower because Defra’s budget was lower. It was not expected that there would be any change to processes or priorities in regard to allocations.

234. **RESOLVED:** The Authority noted the progress made by the South Downs National Park Authority (the Authority) since the last report.

ITEM 9. SOUTH DOWNS NATIONAL PARK TRUST UPDATE

235. The Vice Chair of the Trust and Head of the Trust provided Members with a verbal update.

236. Members made the following comments:

- It had been a fantastic year for the Trust, and the growth record was very impressive.
- There seemed to be a low take-up of the grants to schools. Could more be done by Members to push this scheme out to communities?
- Was the Big Chalk project linked to the wider Chilterns? Would it tie in with the Super National Nature Reserve (SNNR) that the Authority was already a partner in?
- Given the success of the Ouse and Arun projects, was there any mileage in a series of future river-based projects?
- Awareness of the Trust could be improved in the west of the Park. There appeared to be scope for Members to make legacy giving more prominent, through means such as parish magazine articles.
- Had the Trust sharing learnings with other National Parks? The National Park Partnerships were considering creating a Foundation, would this be a rival to the work of the Trust?
- Was the United States model of National Parks one to be considered given the United Kingdom's financial background?

237. Members were advised:

- There needed to be a careful approach taken with grants to ensure they were not over or under subscribed. The grant would be promoted through the schools' network, and the Trust would be open to Members promoting the scheme through their own networks.
- The Big Chalk covered a significant part of England, stretching from Dover to Bristol to Nottingham. It was being led by the National Landscape Association, and the Trust was assisting them in bringing forward a lottery bid which would enable them to support all the landscapes involved in developing projects around the theme.
- The Super National Nature Reserve and rivers were both good opportunities for future projects.
- The Trust was limited in its work due to available resources but do retain an ambition to engage more in the Winchester area. The Trust would provide Members with the necessary material on legacy giving.
- The Head of the Trust was serving as a trustee to the National Parks Partnership. There were some benefits to work together and some benefits to working separately. The Trust was happy to share any learnings with other National Parks and the Head of the Trust had a formal mentoring role with Dartmoor National Park.
- The US model was started over 100 years ago so the UK National Landscapes are really at the beginning of that journey.

ITEM 10. UPDATED SOUTH DOWNS NATIONAL PARK TRUST AND SOUTH DOWNS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING

238. Tim Burr, Janet Duncton and Stephen McAuliffe left the meeting.

239. The Head of Marketing and Income Generation introduced the report (NPA24/25-31).

240. **RESOLVED:** The Authority:

1. Approved the updated Memorandum of Understanding between the South Downs National Park Trust and South Downs National Park Authority with effect from 1 April 2025; and,
2. Delegated authority to the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Chair of the Authority, to make and approve any future minor changes to the Memorandum of Understanding, noting that any major changes would be reported to the Authority for approval.

241. Tim Burr, Janet Duncton and Stephen McAuliffe returned to the meeting.

**ITEM 11. REVENUE BUDGET, CAPITAL STRATEGY AND TREASURY
MANAGEMENT STRATEGY 2025/26 AND MEDIUM-TERM FINANCIAL
STRATEGY 2025/26 – 2029/30**

242. The Interim Chief Finance Officer introduced the report (NPA24/25-32).

243. Members made the following comments:

- With regard to Capital Expenditure, they would like to see more emphasis on investing in assets that could yield a longer-term return not just Invest to Save projects.
- What was the degree of ambition in capital investment that could become income generating?
- What could be done to get Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) reserves off the balance sheets and into projects? Given most parishes had part-time clerks and a shortage of resources, could the Authority use its resources to help get projects moving?
- Could consideration be given to the use of CIL funding to replant trees that were to be removed due to ash dieback and to help with the creation of green corridors?
- Would not want to see the access of CIL funds for parishes to be restricted.
- There was an issue with roads and traffic in the National Park. It had been raised in both the Local Plan and Partnership Management Plan consultations. Many parishes would like it addressed, but County Councils had resourcing issues which limited their ability to act and to put into practice the 'Roads in the South Downs' guidance.
- Would encourage an increased use of apprentices by the Authority.
- Given the flatlining Defra grant was a real terms decline, the Authority would need to be creative and look at what other National Parks are doing, both nationally and internationally. Dartmoor National Park was exploring charging for entry and the Highland Council was consulting on a visitor levy.

244. Members were advised:

- As there was only one year's visibility of funding, the list of projects was cautious. Once the next spending review settlement had been agreed, which was scheduled to cover three years, there would be room for a more ambitious list of projects. This would also enable more partnerships and involvement in longer-term projects.
- Options could be explored at the CIL workshop in supporting delivery partners and or using CIL funding on projects the SDNPA could manage directly to speed up use of the monies. Some CIL funding that had been allocated was now being reclaimed for reallocation, which is in part why the reserves look so large.
- The Authority was planning to work with four apprentices this year, based in its ranger teams. Work was being done to look at how apprenticeships could be done in a more joined up way across National Parks and other National Landscapes.

245. **RESOLVED:** The Authority:

1. Approved the Revenue Budget 2025/26 of £13.750m as detailed in paragraphs 3.1 to 3.23 and Appendix 1.
2. Approved the Capital Strategy 2025/26 including new capital projects totalling £0.344m and capital variations of £0.348m, a total of £0.692m of capital investment as detailed in paragraphs 3.1 to 3.23 and Appendix 2.
3. Approved the Treasury Management Strategy 205/26 at Appendix 3 as recommended by Policy & Resources Committee.
4. Noted the Medium-Term Financial Strategy 2025/26 – 2029/30 at Appendix 5.

246. The meeting adjourned for a short break.

ITEM 12. CORPORATE PLAN 2025-26

247. The Director of Landscape and Strategy introduced the report (NPA24/25-33).

248. The Chair of the Policy and Resources Committee noted that the P&R Committee had interrogated the targets and made suggestions for future Corporate Plans around tracking the use of CIL funds; using more sophisticated tools to measure digital engagement and making the significant contributions from Planning more explicit.

249. Members made the following comments:

- Praised the work of the Comms team in the digital engagement they were achieving.
- Concerned that ‘place’ had a reduced role and that the quality of settlements was not being captured in the Corporate Plan. Place had figured highly in recent PMP engagement activities.
- Green Finance was important as a way of monetizing natural capital and had specific risks and liabilities associated with it. Keen for visibility of those not to be lost with the change to CP 4.1.
- Would like to see a clear breakdown of targets for the emerging market of Green Finance, especially with the recent announcement of the introduction of a British standard for Green Finance, given how well placed the Authority currently is to take advantage of such opportunities.

250. Members were advised:

- There would be regular reporting on Green Finance. The change to CP 4.1 was trying to capture income generation as a whole. It captured the income from the services the Authority provided, not the Green Finance income as a whole.
- Officers would review separating out the Green Finance tracking to ensure metrics were visible.

251. It was proposed, seconded and approved that recommendation 2 be amended to have the Green Finance work be reported explicitly.

252. **RESOLVED:** The Authority:

1. Approved the Corporate Plan 2025-26; and,
2. Delegated authority to the Director of Landscape and Strategy, in consultation with the Chair of the Authority, to make any required changes to the Corporate Plan, taking into account any comments of the Authority, prior to publication.

ITEM 13. SEVEN SISTERS COUNTRY PARK OPERATING PLAN 2025/26

253. The Director of Planning thanked the Member Advisory Group for their continuing work in shaping the operating plan.
254. The Commercial and Strategic Manager introduced the report (NPA24/25-34).
255. Members made the following comments:
- Could more detail be provided on the interaction between the SDNPA and East Sussex County Council on the Exceat bridge.
 - Would like to see more focus on education in the operating plan. Wealdon District Council (WDC) may be able to assist in this area.
 - Commended the ambition within the operating plan and endorsed the principle of the Advisory Board to ensure the work at Seven Sisters County Park (SSCP) maintained visibility.
 - Pleased to see the work with external partners, such as Forestry England mentioned.
 - Welcomed the emphasis on the offer at SSCP and consideration of how that offer could be expanded and improved. Were there lessons there for the National Park as a whole?
 - Concern was expressed over the potential loss of the value of a commercial approach. Costs and revenues treated as reductions in cost, underplays the significance of maximizing revenue. Would value transparency of cost allocation to identify where the SDNPA may be subsidizing SSCP.
 - Was a third-party company being used to promote the programme of events? It could prove to be an interesting revenue stream but may require investment to achieve that.
 - Could future revenue budgets use different colours or columns to make the information clearer.
 - The reality of diversifying visitors into the Park may require larger car parks. Those unfamiliar with National Parks may require familiar facilities to provide them with confidence and reassurance at gateway locations.
256. Members were advised:
- If the proposed Exceat bridge works go ahead the resulting disruption would negatively impact income generation forecasts. There is no financial contribution to the works by the Authority.
 - The Operating Plan was realistic with the resources available and the comments about WDC were noted.
 - There were many costs relating to SSCP that were picked up elsewhere in the Authority. This report was focused on the operational delivery of SSCP. Increased detail could be built into future reports but some costs go beyond the remit of the Operating Plan.
 - The Advisory Group have pushed hard to monitor costs to identify where the Authority is subsidizing costs that meet other purposes and duties of the Authority.
 - The programme of events was done in-house and was building on the trial run in 2024. There had been expressions for corporate hires. The current focus was on direct delivery or working with existing partners. Going forward there may be opportunities to further expand.
257. **RESOLVED:** The Authority:
- I. Approved the Seven Sisters Country Park Operating Plan 2025/26 as set out in Appendix I.

258. Mark Fairweather left the meeting.

ITEM 14. RESPONSES TO THE DEVOLUTION PRIORITY PROGRAMME CONSULTATIONS

259. The Head of Governance and Monitoring Officer introduced the report (NPA24/25-35).

260. Mark Fairweather returned to the meeting.

261. Members made the following comments:

- How much should the Authority offer to contribute in areas where it could provide learning and advice on landscape led activities?
- Concern about the Mayor's responsibility for preparing a strategic plan and how that would interact with the Authority's Local Plan. Would the Mayor have call in powers on planning applications? Would the spatial strategy be obliged to further the purposes of the National Park?
- How was the Authority communicating with other interested parties in this process? It was understood that almost 30 organisations were considering applying to be non-constituent members in Sussex. Was the Authority consulting with the New Forest National Park over shared or alternating membership in Hampshire?
- Why was the suggested response that the Authority neither agreed or disagreed with the governance issues?
- Was there a concern that elected representatives may be against any Quasi-Autonomous Non-Government Organisation (QUANGO) having voting rights on the Mayoral Combined County Authority (MCCA)?
- Given the MCCA would be setting strategic housing targets, and the guidance over the s245 duty to co-operate, there was a strong case for National Parks to have voting rights.
- Could the word 'setting' be added to the response to Question 6, given the importance of setting in the wider landscape, particularly with National Infrastructure projects at the edge of the Park.
- Was the potential loss of local voices in regard to Question 7 an issue for the National Park, or just an issue for local councils?
- There was a distinction between the consultation on the MCCA and the creation of Unitary Authorities, and this was a consultation on the establishment of a MCCA.
- Was the proposed MCCA better than the existing setup in the view of the Authority with regard to the response to Question 1?
- This consultation is not just about decision making but also resourcing.

262. Members were advised:

- The section 245 duty of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023 would apply to any new authority. The mayor could potentially exercise their call in powers, but practically that has only been exercised on developments of significant size and regional importance. It is a risk and is recorded in the Risk Register. Ongoing conversations have been positive and collaborative with regard to the role the Authority would play in this process.
- There was a parallel process alongside devolution with the progression of the Planning and Infrastructure Bill. That legislation would set out the detail of call in powers and the role of National Parks Authorities.

- The Senior Leadership Team and the Chair of the Authority have been engaging widely and have also communicated with other National Landscapes such as Chichester Harbour and High Weald.
- The suggested response was the best form of the Authority's views. Whilst other bodies may take an alternative view, officers considered that, in the spirit of consultation, requesting voting rights would ensure the best representation for the SDNPA.
- A reference to setting could be added to the response to Question 6.
- The response to question one is informed by the view that it is better for the Authority to be able to look to influence decision making locally through a MCCA than through Westminster.

263. **RESOLVED:** The Authority:

1. Noted the consultations on Establishing Mayoral Combined County Authority across East Sussex, West Sussex and Brighton and Hove (Appendix 1) and across Hampshire, Portsmouth, Isle of Wight and Southampton (Appendix 2) and the Devolution Framework Summary (Appendix 3);
2. Received and considered the draft consultation response (Appendix 4) for both Sussex and Brighton and Hampshire and the Solent; and,
3. Delegated authority to the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Chair of the Authority, to finalise the Authority's responses, taking into account any comments of the Authority, and to submit the responses to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

ITEM 15. SCHEME OF MEMBERS' ALLOWANCES

264. The Head of Governance and Monitoring Officer introduced the report (NPA24/25-36).

265. Members made the following comments:

- Should all Members declare an interest?

266. Members were advised:

- Whilst all Members have an interest in this item, it has never been considered necessary for Members to declare an interest or seek a dispensation on this issue.

267. **RESOLVED:** The Authority:

1. Received and considered the outcomes of the independent review of the Scheme of Allowances set out at Appendix 2;
2. Agreed the independent review recommendations set out in section 4; and,
3. Adopted the Scheme of Members' Allowances set out at Appendix 1 to take effect from 1 April 2025 noting that subsequent increases would take place, without reference back to the NPA, each year until 2029 in line with the indexation provisions set out in the scheme.

ITEM 16. PLANNING COMMITTEE

268. Authority Members noted the minutes of the Planning Committee meetings held on 14 November, 12 December 2024 and 13 February 2025.

ITEM 17. POLICY & RESOURCES COMMITTEE

269. Authority Members noted the minutes of the Policy & Resources Committee meeting held on 21 November 2024.

ITEM 18. APPOINTMENT, MANAGEMENT AND STANDARDS COMMITTEE

270. Authority Members noted the minutes of the Appointment, Management and Standards Committee meetings held on 24 July and 9 August 2024.

ITEM 19. POLICY & RESOURCES COMMITTEE

271. Authority Members noted the Part II minutes of the Policy & Resources Committee meeting held on 21 November 2024.

ITEM 20. APPOINTMENT, MANAGEMENT AND STANDARDS COMMITTEE

272. Authority Members noted the Part II minutes of the Appointment, Management and Standards Committee meetings held on 24 July and 9 August 2024.
273. The Chair closed the meeting at 3.31pm.

Signed _____

SOUTH DOWNS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

AUTHORITY MEETING

Held at 10am on 22 May 2025 in the Memorial Hall, South Downs Centre, North Street, Midhurst, West Sussex, GU29 9DH.

Present:

Vanessa Rowlands (Chair), Alun Alesbury, Heather Baker, Tim Burr, Antonia Cox, John Cross, Mark Fairweather, Theresa Fowler, Joan Grech, Melanie Hunt, Stephen McAuliffe, Jerry Pett, Mark Potter, Steven Ridgeon, Andrew Shaxson, Daniel Stewart-Roberts, Vicki Wells and Stephen Whale.

South Downs National Park Authority Officers:

Siôn McGeever (Chief Executive Officer), Laura Sercombe (Director of Landscape and Strategy), Tim Slaney (Director of Planning), Annie Barnes (Deputy Monitoring Officer), Richard Fryer (Senior Governance Officer), Ruth James (Communications and Engagement Officer), Anne Rehill (Performance and Projects Manager), Richard Sandiford (Head of Governance and Monitoring Officer), Katharine Stewart (Planning Policy Lead), Victoria Turner (Head of Finance and Corporate Services).

Also attended by:

Sarah Thompson (SDNPA Boardroom Apprentice)

CHAIR'S OPENING REMARKS

274. The Chair welcomed all present and provided general housekeeping information.

ITEM 1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

275. Apologies were received from Paul Bevan, Debbie Curnow-Ford, Peter Diplock, John Hyland, Gary Marsh and Robert Mocatta.

ITEM 2. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

276. There were no declarations made.

ITEM 3. URGENT MATTERS

277. There were none.

ITEM 4. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

278. There was none.

ITEM 5. NEED FOR PART II EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

279. There was none.

ITEM 6. REVIEW OF THE SOUTH DOWNS NATIONAL PARK PARTNERSHIP MANAGEMENT PLAN - ENGAGEMENT PROGRAMME AND FEEDBACK

280. The Authority Chair introduced the item. The Performance and Projects Manager reminded Members of the report (NPA24/25-37).

281. Steven Ridgeon reflected on the last meeting of the Local Plan Steering Group, noting the wide-ranging nature of the discussions, the sense of ownership by the partners involved as they reviewed the feedback from the engagement program and the consultation draft of the Partnership Management Plan (PMP).

282. Members made the following comments:

- Noted that the PMP consultation was running in parallel to the Local Plan consultation.

- Questioned what whether the definition of ‘cultural heritage’ used by the different groups consulted was similar, and the implications of that distinction between built landscape and diverse cultural groups.
- Noted there was only draft guidance on what should be included in a management plan.
- Welcomed the broad consultation and were pleased that new groups, who had not previously taken part, had shared their views. This level of engagement should be sustained throughout the process.
- Should consider lessons from this process on how engagement could be increased for future PMPs.
- Welcomed the recommendation in Appendix I to produce a Comms plan to support Officers and Members in communicating the plan and provide additional training for new Members in Management Plans.

283. Members were advised:

- That officers had sought to avoid using the term ‘cultural heritage’ where possible as it could be viewed as inaccessible and focusing instead on the use of stories.
- The PMP had been developed from the engagement combined with evidence from experts.
- The SDNPA Corporate Plan would focus on the Authority’s purposes and duties and how they would be discharged. The PMP would focus on partnership working, with both new and existing partners.

284. **RESOLVED:** The Authority noted the engagement programme undertaken as part of the review of the South Downs National Park Partnership Management Plan and the feedback from the engagement programme as set out at Appendices 2 and 3.

285. **ITEM 8. SOUTH DOWNS PARTNERSHIP MANAGEMENT PLAN 2026-2031 AND VISION 2060 – DRAFT FOR PUBLIC CONSULTATION**

286. The Communications and Engagement Officer introduced the report (NPA24/25-38).

Vision for 2060

287. Members made the following comments:

- The vision was ambitious, inclusive, encouraging and well crafted.
- Liked the poetic tone but questioned whether the wording about ‘Dark Night Skies’ could be clearer. Could the language be tweaked to make the stars more visible rather than more numerous? Could it be more active ‘where the stars fill our dark night skies’?
- Could further clarity be made on the importance of both dark skies and the visibility of the stars.
- The first purpose of the National Park was less explicit in this vision but more inspirational.
- Needed to understand the difference between a vision and a set of objectives.
- Was the word ‘rural’ in ‘green rural economy’ necessary as it may unintentionally exclude urban areas within the Park?
- Did the use of the term ‘adapted’ suggest complacency. Would resilient be a better term to use?
- Was the vision too generic to any National Park? Was it specific enough to the South Downs?

- Did the use of the term ‘vibrant’ clash with tranquillity.

288. Members were advised:

- The steering group had pushed back on the phrase ‘climate positive’ as they rejected the personification of the landscape.
- The SDNP was the most urban of the 22 International Dark Night Skies reserves, and Dark Night Skies was the biggest attractor for many visitors to the National Park. Dark Night Skies were not just about tranquillity but also darkness, which was very important for nature.
- The language of the vision could be further finetuned.
- Officer would take away Member comments for consideration.

Aims & Objectives

289. Members made the following comments:

- Was sustainable farming important enough to be its own priority?
- Nature recovery could take place across many different sectors.
- Did the reference to arts and heritage include crafts? Sussex and Hampshire had some specific endemic crafts associated with the landscape, such as hedge laying.

290. Members were advised:

- The focus was now on regenerative, rather than sustainable farming. Farming delivered on multiple priorities, so was not an outcome in itself but a key deliverer of outcomes.
- Crafts were included in the section on arts and heritage.

Nature and Climate

Aim 1: Nature Recovery

291. Members made the following comments:

- Did the reference to land-based businesses exclude fisheries?
- It would be good to explicitly reference the progress that had already been made towards the Authority’s targets to increase their credibility.
- The use of the term ‘private finance’ was questioned as it mainly referred to charges on new housing developments rather than private investment. Whilst this was a small element of private finance through the purchase of voluntary credits it might be advisable to use a different term.
- How would measurement of improvement or maintenance of climate rich sites allow for changes as climate change impacts transform what species would thrive there? It was important that the Authority made clear its aim to support and adapt Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) not preserve them in a fixed state.
- Concern was expressed at the use of the phrase ‘slowed the pace of deterioration’ as the data in the State of Nature report did not reflect that. The ‘bigger, better, more joined-up approach’ did not tally with the Defra data either, which was skewed by the inclusion of fish. Could the language be amended to reflect the evidence?
- Clarification was requested on whether there were limits to Authority support of ‘any’ diversification activity, given the controversial nature of some recent diversifications.

292. Members were advised:

- There was no intention to exclude fisheries from the rural economy, and they should be included in the final draft.
- There was a graphic planned to show the progress made towards attaining targets.
- The wording was chosen to reflect that this was a five-year plan and to allow for a significant expansion of voluntary investment.
- Officers would review the language used to ensure it was appropriate for the evidence and was appropriate in regard to diversification.

Aim 2: Climate Action

293. Members made the following comments:

- Clarification was requested on what was meant by 'South Downs National Park'. Did this refer to the Authority, or the Park as a whole? In what sense was the SDNP on track to become net-zero by 2040?
- The Policy and Resources Committee received regular reports on performance against the target for the Park to become net-zero, building off the detailed consultants report that examined all sources of carbon across the Park and the offset activities that could be implemented.
- As net-zero was an increasingly politically loaded term, was there another way to express the aspiration that may cause less disconnect?

294. Members were advised:

- Aim two referenced the [Climate Change Action Plan](#) and referred all activity within the boundary of the Park.
- Officers would consider whether there was a less politically loaded term than 'net-zero'.

Aim 3: Clean Water

295. Members made the following comments:

- Welcomed the emphasis on water. Was objective 3.2a, a 10% improvement in Water Framework Directive status, ambitious enough?
- Could clarity be provided on what the 10% improvement in Water Framework Directive status metric referred to.
- Was the Authority a member of the stakeholders group hosted by Wealden District Council?
- Could clarification be provided on why there were two different definitions of target 3.2a. The PMP Consultation draft refers to a 10% improvement, but the Integrated Improvement Assessment references the completion of three chalk stream restoration projects.
- As water was no respecter of boundaries, it should be recognised that the Authority would need to work across boundaries with partners where appropriate.

296. Members were advised:

- The target of a 10% improvement in Water Framework Directive status had been constructed to be realistically achievable within the five-year timeframe. The targets would be sense-checked to ensure they were ambitious but achievable.
- The 10% improvement in Water Framework Directive status referred to an improvement in the quality, not the quantity, of waterbodies.

- Officers would investigate and respond with confirmation as to whether the Authority was a member of the stakeholders group hosted by Wealden District Council. Work was being done to bring catchments and Rivers Trusts together and the Authority had recently joined the Independent Climate and Environment Group (ICEG) which held Southern Water to account.
- The Impact Assessment used an earlier draft of target 3.2a. The 10% improvement in Water Framework Directive status was the correct definition.

297. The meeting adjourned for a short break at 11.56am.

People and Place

Aim 4: Young People

298. Members made the following comments:

- Would like to see Aim 4 broadened out beyond the narrow focus on training and skills. Would welcome an emphasis on getting young people into the Park.
- It was important to consider the needs of primary age children. Keen that the Authority was engaging with children who lived in the Park as well as visitors to the Park.
- It would be good to go beyond the skill focus and remember that the Park was a place to enjoy and have fun in. Could this be expressed more strongly?
- The work of the Rivers Trust in engaging with primary schools had proven effective.
- The Authority was not the only mechanism to getting young people into the Park. Consideration needed to be given in how to measure the work of partner organisations to engage primary and secondary schools and not limit the ambition to just the work of the Authority.
- Should obtaining accurate data on the totality of activity by all the partners be an objective for the PMP? That would enable trend analysis to be done
- Was target 4.2 ambitious enough?
- Was there too much of a focus on people and not enough attention paid to place?

299. Members were advised:

- Aim 4 was devised as a result of input from young people who said they needed pathways into careers. The comms and engagement strategy would look at engaging young people more generally and getting them into the Park.
- Emerging evidence that early engagement was very important for later connection to an environment. Target 4.1a did include primary schools.
- Officers would review whether target 4.2 could be made more ambitious.
- The Authority was engaging with 69% of schools in and around the Park and the learning network engagement model was now being emulated by other National Parks. This model was not just focused on direct provision by the Authority.
- Culture could be expressed as where people and place come together. Officers would review the wording to ensure that Place received sufficient emphasis as it underpinned much of the work here.

Aim 5: Welcome and Access

300. Members made the following comments:

- It was important to remember government policy on electric cars in regard to 'reducing reliance on cars to access the National Park'.

- Unfortunate that many visitors don't feel safe or welcome in the National Park. Could safety be incorporated into the wording somewhere?
- Accessibility, wild camping and public access rights were not addressed.
- Should an opinion be expressed on the government considering extending the principle of wild camping beyond Dartmoor as a result of the recent Supreme Court ruling?
- The reference to 19 million visitors becomes 19 million people later in the report, but the data underpinning it seems to be based on 19 million visits. It was important the Authority was careful in its handling of data and uses the correct terminology.
- There was a desire for people to connect with cultural heritage as much as the built environment and the landscape, such as music festivals. Was there a reason this aim had not been extended to include cultural heritage?
- Was it appropriate to leave consideration of public transport to a future PMP just because it was difficult? If the Authority was keen to encourage sustainable access it should be grappling with this issue, even if there were no easy solutions.
- Devolution would be an important factor in the provision of public transport, and consistency with other local authorities and national policy would be key.
- A previous draft of the PMP raised the issue of accessible toilets and rest stops within the National Park as well as disabled access car parking spaces. Should these issues be included?
- What were the current levels on engagement around target 5.2b to assess whether the targets were appropriately ambitious?
- Welcomed the push towards Active Travel within the Park but many of the public rights of way within the Park don't have active travel or public transport infrastructure so must be accessed by car, which could cause issues for small villages overwhelmed by visitors. The Park was for residents as well as visitors.
- Poverty could be a barrier to access, with the cost of equipment like boots preventing some people from visiting the Park safely. Was there scope for Corporate Partnerships to minimise this barrier?
- Dark Night Skies were particularly important around the periphery of the Park. Should the Authority be more vocal on this issue?

301. Members were advised:

- The wording around safety could be revisited.
- The Authority would need to follow the government policy position on wild camping so it would prove difficult to express an opinion.
- There was no reason to exclude cultural heritage from this aim. The wording would be reviewed to consider inclusion of it.
- The issues around public transport were being investigated by the National Trails and Countryside Access Lead Officer. It might be that public transport would be included in the Corporate Plan, rather than the PMP.
- Accessible toilets and spaces have been removed from the national data set, which had made tracking the data much more difficult. The focus of the PMP had been to have smart targets that could be measured and tracked, but just because they were not in the PMP did not mean that those issues were any less important to the Authority which would continue to work on them.

- The targets for 5.2b were stretching but achievable. They should be achievable in a bumper year, and 2026 was the 10th anniversary of the SDNP being an International Dark Night Skies reserve.
- The Comms and Engagement Strategy would be working with the PMP to manage visitor numbers and to encourage and entice people to visit alternate sites or at alternative times to prevent these sites being overwhelmed.
- Black Robin Farm were considering having kit available for use by school parties.
- The provision of Dark Night Skies relied upon partnership working with Highway Authorities and other partners. A briefing would be provided to the Senior Leadership Team and the Chair of the Authority for discussions with partners.

Aim 6: Arts and Heritage

302. Members made the following comments:

- Welcomed the phrase ‘dynamic and ever-changing landscape’ in objective 6.1.
- The term heritage was used differently in different places and could lose meaning. Not just backward looking but also involved innovative and creative solutions.
- Questioned whether ‘understood’ the best word for aim 6 as it implied things were settled, and suggested ‘interpreted’ might better reflect the evolving nature of heritage.
- The Lewes Bonfire was one of the most significant annual cultural heritage events in the Southeast of England yet the Authority seemed coy in promoting it. The Sussex police often seemed to seek to minimise attendance.
- Were targets 6.1a and 6.1c measurable as written? What was the starting point?
- Could the Authority go beyond the Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework (PLTOF) figures and be more specific with its targets?
- Did the reference to landscape in target 6.2 include or exclude townscapes?

303. Members were advised:

- Officers could review the use of the term heritage in the document and look for the correct phrasing to capture that creative forward-looking approach.
- Officers could review whether ‘interpreted’ was a better term to use than ‘understood’.
- The Authority was keen to celebrate events that were unique to the South Downs, but managing numbers to ensure that everyone had a great experience was important.
- The Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework (PLTOF) measures didn’t require a specific target, just that the numbers were reported. The Authority did have baseline data so that the targets were measurable.
- Officers would review whether more specific targets could be set for targets 6.1a and 6.1c.
- The reference to landscape in target 6.2 included townscapes. It was named in the Local Plan and followed on from a European convention.

Aim 7: A Thriving Greener Place

304. Members made the following comments:

- Why was the statistic about 23% of residents being directors or senior officials included in Figure 10, and how it was relevant?

- The wording of figure 10 could be improved as the “5% of visitor economy ... is accommodation enterprise” did not make good verbal sense. If 43% of residents commuted outside of the Park to work, should the % commuting into the Park for work also be included?
- Could the balance of objective 7.1 be more clearly expressed in getting the balance right between benefiting residents of the Park and visitors to the Park?

305. Members were advised:

- Figure 10 was a pre-existing graphic used for earlier meetings and would be under review in the final document.
- The report would be refined through the consultation process and would be worked on over the summer.

306. **RESOLVED:** The Authority:

1. Approved the draft Vision 2060 for the National Park, as set out at Appendix I, for consultation as part of the consultation on the draft Partnership Management Plan.
2. Approved the draft Partnership Management Plan 2026-31, as set out at Appendix I, for consultation.
3. Noted the timeline as set out in paragraph 3.18.
4. Delegated to the Director of Landscape and Strategy, in consultation with the Chair of the Authority, to make any changes to the draft vision or draft Partnership Management Plan arising from comments at the NPA meeting and any other minor and presentational changes to the document for the consultation.

307. The Chair closed the meeting at 13.08pm.

Signed _____